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UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

**AUTHORITY, IDENTITY AND THE FEMALE VOICE IN THE BOOK OF**

**MARGERY KEMPE**

BY

LINDA SINCLAIR



A thesis

submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree  
of **MASTER OF ARTS**

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

Edmonton, Alberta

FALL, 1992



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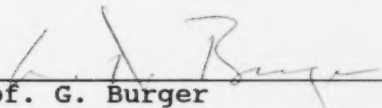
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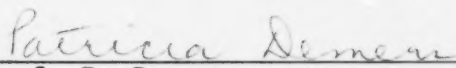
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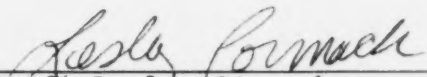
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The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research for acceptance, a thesis entitled **Authority, Identity and the Female Voice in The Book of Margery Kempe** submitted by **LINDA SINCLAIR** in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of **MASTER OF ARTS**.

  
Prof. G. Burger

  
Prof. P. Demers

  
Prof. Lesley Cormack

October 8, 1992

### Abstract

Early critical commentary on The Book of Margery Kempe centred on whether Margery Kempe could be considered an authoritative and believable mystic. Margery's personality and mystical practice were scrutinized, and critics employed monolithic models and conceptions of the human personality, authority, mysticism, and the text to decide Kempe's identity and authority. Critics' confidence about the appropriate response to Margery's book was problematized by the existence of another version of the work which presented a differing model of the mystic and mystical text. This second identity for The Book of Margery Kempe necessitates a reconsideration of the issues of authority and identity within the text in terms of critical theories that offer more complex considerations of "subjectivity." In Chapter Three, I argue in favor of a model of the "free-play" of writing in medieval manuscript culture as an appropriate way to reconceptualize authority and identity as they operate in the text. I also argue in Chapter Four that Anthony Giddens' notion of "practical consciousness", and his view of the subject's agency, are relevant to an examination of the text. I discover that in The Book of Margery Kempe, authority is shown to be generated by, and constituted in, the present moment of social interaction. In Chapter Five I briefly discuss the body-centred medieval religious ritual of Eucharist devotion and consider Caroline Bynum's gendered

analysis of late medieval piety as "female." I conclude that the female body in The Book of Margery Kempe is not represented as a revealed natural object, but is shown to be a social and linguistic construct which cannot "fix" the identity and authority of either Margery Kempe or her mysticism. In the conclusion, I consider the text's acknowledgement of a radical incompleteness of identity and suggest that interventions by early critics to "finish" or complete The Book of Margery Kempe were misguided and doomed to failure. As an alternative, recent critical theory, at its best, allows for self-conscious critical intervention that seeks to participate in and not to "end" the free play of the present moment of critical reconstitution of the text.

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## Chapter I: Introduction

Early critical commentary on The Book of Margery Kempe centred on whether Margery Kempe could be considered an authoritative and credible mystic. Critics believed that the discovery of a manuscript version of Margery's book gave them an unprecedented opportunity to hear and judge the "authentic" voice of a medieval woman speaking to them about her eccentric life and her ambitious claims of spiritual devotion and ecstatic visions. Margery's "personality" received much of the initial critical attention, many critics reacting negatively to what they saw as Kempe's personal failings. Kempe's mystical practices were also scrutinized, as critics attempted to find a place for this woman mystic in their understanding of medieval mystical tradition, and the tradition of Middle English mystics in particular.

These initial critical attempts to determine the identity and authority of Margery Kempe were based on monolithic models of a stable and unified human personality, and employed as well stable and unified conceptions of authority, mysticism, gender and the text. However, as I discuss in Chapter Two of this thesis, critical confidence about the appropriate response to The Book of Margery Kempe was problematized by the existence of another long-known version of the work which presented a differing model of the

mystic and mystical text. My suggestion that mysticism is represented in Margery's book as having more than one identity initiates a reconsideration of the issues of identity, authority and gender in the text.

In Chapter Three, I examine modern critical theories that usefully complicate attempts to praise or blame Margery Kempe by offering a more complex consideration of the "subject" as other than a stable and unified entity. New versions of subjectivity, such as the "social" subject of Marxism and the "split-subject" of psychoanalytic criticism, take into account circumstances beyond the control of the individual, circumstances which make the human subject "subject to" unconscious or extra-personal influences. Recent criticism of The Book of Margery Kempe informed by these theories is able to take into account the text's representation of elements of social and psychological life often dismissed or disparaged by early critics. However, the problem of the agency of the subject is not adequately addressed in this criticism, which tends reductively to depict Margery Kempe as completely the victim of oppressive social or psychological structures.

At the end of Chapter Three, I introduce the "problem" of the representation of authority within The Book of Margery Kempe, arguing that monolithic conceptions of authority are not appropriate for understanding the operation of authority in the work. I suggest that Robert

Sturges' model of the "free play" of writing in medieval manuscript culture may offer an appropriate way to reconceptualize identity, authority and gender as they are encountered in the text. After examining models of authority in the work of recent critics Karma Lochrie and Sarah Beckwith, Chapter Four describes Anthony Giddens' notion of "practical consciousness" and his view that the subject knows a great deal about his own society and has the agency to intervene in events to influence (not determine) their course. Giddens' social theory allows the subject and authority to be conceived of as making available multiple positions and "identities" in society. In examining the representation of authority in The Book of Margery Kempe, I discover that, while authority is sometimes presented in the text as if it were a monolithic object pursued by a questing Margery Kempe determined to achieve authoritative status as a mystic, more often authority is shown to be generated by, and constituted in, the present moment of social interaction.

Chapter Five examines the 'authority' of the gendered (female) body as a factor in The Book of Margery Kempe. The human body is unarguably at the centre of late medieval religious understanding and practice, and as an example, I briefly discuss the body-centred religious ritual of Eucharist devotion. I also discuss Caroline Bynum's gendered analysis of late medieval piety as "female",

especially her argument that the female body is the means by which late medieval women can gain access both to spiritual power and a particularly female authority. I suggest that in The Book of Margery Kempe, however, the female body is not represented as a revealed natural object or authentic source of authority, but is shown to be a social and linguistic construct created and recreated during the course of lived events and the writing of the text. The human body therefore cannot "fix" or authorize the identity of either Margery Kempe or her mysticism.

In the conclusion, I consider the acknowledgement by The Book of Margery Kempe of a radical incompleteness of identity, in terms of a medieval manuscript culture in which the present moment of the text is always fissured by consciousness of past writings and of the yet unrealized future versions of a literary work. Thus the frequent interventions by early critics to "complete" The Book of Margery Kempe were, I suggest, misguided and doomed to failure. As an alternative to this kind of critical intervention, recent critical theory, at its best, not only permits or directs the critic to reconsider monolithic conceptions of text, mysticism, authority and identity but also allows for a self-conscious critical intervention that seeks to participate in and not to end the "free play" of the present moment of critical reconstitution of the text.

## Chapter II: The Two Books

"Her endith þis tretys, for God toke hym to hys mercy þat wrot þe copy of þis boke, &, þow þat he wrot not clerly ne opynly to owr maner of spekyng, he in hys maner of wrytyng & spellyng mad trewe sentens þe wech, thorw þe help of God & of hir-selfe þat had al þis tretys in felyng & werkyng, is trewly drawyn owt of þe copy in-to þis lityl boke." (The Book of Margery Kempe 220.18-24)<sup>1</sup>

Until 1934, The Book of Margery Kempe was known only through the seven page quarto "A Shorte Treatyse of Contemplacyon taught by our lorde Ihesu cryste / or taken out of the boke of Margerie kempe of lyn," published by Wynkyn de Worde in 1501. Considered in isolation, these seven pages "taken out of" The Book of Margery Kempe presented few problems of scholarly categorization. The title of the short text promised mystical writings, and its twenty-eight "devotional passages" contained little to disturb early twentieth-century expectations about the form and content of such works. The devotional extracts were judged to resemble other known works of contemplation from the period<sup>2</sup>, and on the basis of the words "a devout anchoress" added to the treatise title and colophon in a 1521 reprint by Pepwell, the name "Margerie Kempe" was

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<sup>1</sup> All references are to the Early English Text Society edition of The Book of Margery Kempe edited by S. Meech and H.E. Allen. Citations give page and line number.

<sup>2</sup> See R.M. Wilson who states that the de Worde passages "are indistinguishable from the general mystical literature of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries" (110).

unproblematically included in "the standard works on the enclosed religious life in England" (Colledge 16).

The de Worde "treatise on contemplation" presents a spare, focused and easily translatable template for spiritual life and practice. Its devotional passages are set out typographically as "discrete units", with each passage headed by a paraph, and remaining line space left blank following the end period of a passage (Holbrook 28). Though the passages are "pieces" of text derived from earlier, much more extensive, manuscript material, they are not presented as an assembly of random, unconnected or disjointed fragments of an original. Rather, the passages are organized in a structure whose tone, themes and motifs focus uninterruptedly on a version of mystical experience and practice. Typographical evidence of junctures, fissures and possible gaps, signs of the constructedness of the text, is subordinated to and displaced by the apparent functional unity of the treatise.

For the most part, the passages concentrate on dramatic dialogue between an unspecified woman and her impersonal interlocutor, Christ, in which the woman offers words and acts of devotion and receives in return instruction, direction and reassurance on the spiritual/mystical life and its consequent rewards. The text opens with an offer of devotion by the woman, and the response of the divinity:

She desyred many tymes that her hede myght be  
smyten of with an axe vpon a blocke for the loue

of our lorde Ihesu. Thenne sayd our lorde Ihesu in  
her mynde: I thanke the doughter that thou woldest  
dye for my loue; for as often as thou thynkest so  
thou shalt haue the same mede in heuen as yf thou  
suffredest the same dethe. . . (de Worde fol.1a)<sup>3</sup>

Addresses by Christ to his spiritual daughter predominate. Sue Ellen Holbrook calculates that Christ speaks sixty per cent of the words, and suggests that the woman's words, mostly in the form of indirect speech, function either to elicit instruction or to demonstrate "her willingness to follow . . . counsel" (29). Christ's words validate or privilege specific acts and modes of devotion, directing the "daughter" toward some forms of behavior and, at least implicitly, away from others. Weeping, thinking on Christ, contemplation, silently attending to Christ's words in her soul, and the inward or private "will" to compassion are accorded "merit" superior to more public, active or embodied modes of devotion. Christ thereby underwrites these superior forms of behavior as more than adequate alternatives for other spiritual activities:

Doughter, for to byd many bedes, it is good to  
them that cannot better do, & yet it is not  
profyte. . . . I haue often tolde þe, doughter,  
that thynkyng, wepyng & hye contemplacyon is þe  
best lyf in erthe . . . (de Worde fol.1a-1b)

The possibility of dramatic public displays of devotion, martyrdom or abasement, such as the daughter's

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<sup>3</sup> The transcription of this and other quoted passages from the de Worde printing is mine. See also the Early English Text Society edition of The Book of Margery Kempe 353-357.

expressed wish to be decapitated, or her offer to be drawn through town naked on a hurdle for love of her Lord, are closed off by Christ's offer of merit for the will (or desire) rather than the physical or social act:

Doughter, þu shalte haue as grete mede & as grete  
rewarde with me in heuen for thy good seruyce &  
thy good dedes that thou haste do in thy mynde as  
yf thou haddest do þe same with thy bodely wyttes  
. . . (de Worde fol.3a)

The devotional passages are thus ordered as a progression toward spiritual perfection, beginning with an improper mode of devotion (the desire for martyrdom) for which a "correct" behavior, weeping, is substituted, and continuing through stages of increasing love and devotion, promises of heavenly reward and pardon, access to the "right way" to heaven and an assurance of grace (Holbrook 30). At all points, the text maintains an abstract and impersonal didacticism preserving the basic anonymity of the perfection-questing "daughter" and providing no physical, social, economic or institutional context for her relationship with Christ. In this way, the de Worde treatise consistently presents itself as the exemplar of a most worthy model of mysticism.

When Hope Emily Allen in 1934 discovered a manuscript extensively recording the life and mysticism of a middle-class medieval wife from Lynn and identified it as the "full" version of The Book of Margery Kempe she touched off an unexpected literary "identity crisis," as scholars were forced to rethink their understanding of the mode of

mysticism and mystical writing associated with the name "Margery Kempe."<sup>4</sup> The early reviews and articles concerning this new Margery in Catholic journals and popular periodicals, and the standard texts on mysticism and mystical writings published from the 1940s to the 1960s, generally begin by mentioning the short text of devotional passages, and then record the sensation produced by the newly revealed manuscript. Commentators are "astonished," "disillusioned," "disconcerted" and even "embarrassed" by the character of Margery Kempe and the mode of mysticism depicted in the manuscript.<sup>5</sup>

The identity of the de Worde treatise was now complicated and compromised by its relationship to the new manuscript version of Margery's book. For the de Worde treatise was not, as had been expected, a greatly condensed but "faithful" version of unremarkable devotional writings by an enclosed woman mystic. Comparing the short text of devotional passages and the manuscript material, scholars were confronted not only with differing representations of mystics and mysticism but also with evidence of the radical process of construction required to produce the de Worde

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<sup>4</sup> Allen's identification of the manuscript led to publication of two differing editions of the manuscript version of The Book of Margery Kempe -- a modernized edition published in 1936, and the scholarly edition published by the Early English Text Society in 1940.

<sup>5</sup> See Thurston's "astonishing" (446), Dinnis's "staggeringly unexpected" (84), O'Connell's "highly embarrassing" (178) and Knowles' "disillusionment" (139).

text. Conspicuous was a wealth of social, historical, economic, institutional and psychological elements present in the manuscript version and absent in de Worde's condensed text. Left out of the devotional treatise were details of the "sacred and profane events" of an uncloistered, socially engaged life, including

. . . the names of places, holidays and people; the visits, the books, the meals; the specific controversies, accusations, persecution, rescue, advice and help from churchmen and townfolk, the verbal exchanges with defenders and friends, strangers and enemies . . . (Holbrook 33)

Appropriately or not, these details make up a major part of the "mysticism" practised in The Book of Margery Kempe. Compiling the devotional passages printed by de Worde had evidently meant treating all non-devotional detail as encrustations to be excised<sup>6</sup> in favor of material that, reformulated, could serve a notably different conception of mysticism. The meditative "repose" achieved in the short text, with its measured gradations of spiritual elevation, is in direct contrast to the incessant mobility of both the manuscript's narrative form (moving -- though not in linear sequence -- through events before, during and after Kempe's

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<sup>6</sup> See Holbrook who outlines the extractor's painstaking search for and reordering of passages that "will yield a certain lesson" and which "commend the patient, invisible toleration of scorn and the private, inaudible mental practice of good will in meditation rather than public or physical acts or sensory signs of communion with God. . ." (35). She uses words such as "ignore", "skip", "remove", "dismiss", "drop" and "avoid" to characterize the activity that results in the twenty-eight devotional passages printed by de Worde.

spiritual conversion) and its subject (whose pilgrimage travels, both local and foreign, frequently punctuate the text). Alongside the anonymous spiritual daughter of the de Worde treatise now appeared the very particularized woman and "personality" of the manuscript, whose spirituality is described in conjunction with a husband, fourteen childbirths, failed business ventures, and spiritual "gifts" that include publicly exhibited loud screams, bodily writhings, and superabundant tears of contrition. Mystical conversation in the manuscript is not -- as it was in de Worde's text -- a private matter between a spiritually focused, passively receptive mystic and her divine instructor. The two-way flow of words and deeds between mystic and Christ lacks the consistent hierarchical structure apparent in the de Worde treatise. The manuscript's dialogues represent a Christ actively engaged with, or even entangled in, the social concerns and interests of Margery Kempe and her struggle for community acceptance of her manner of life and mode of mysticism.<sup>7</sup> This Christ directs Kempe toward specific behaviors, such as his wish that she wear white clothing (32.16-18) and his refusal to remove from her the disruptive spiritual gifts

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<sup>7</sup> See 17.19-20 in which Christ promises Margery "grace j-now to answer euery clerke", and 45.22-29 in which Christ becomes directly involved in Kempe's dealings with a widow.

which make her a target of community hostility.<sup>8</sup> However, he is also himself directed by Kempe to act as honest executor of stored merit derived from her own spiritual good works (20.31-33).

Given the differences between the two versions of the work, the condensed text could no longer be termed an inevitable or even a 'natural' reproduction of the original manuscript. The treatise, which in itself had seemed a worthy guide to mystical life, was now judged to have been a suspiciously and reproachably unreliable indicator of the "nature" and identity of The Book of Margery Kempe. The treatise is accused, in effect, of "fronting" for a text that is not what it should be, for it should be, and is not, like the treatise. The fixed, stable identity once conferred on The Book of Margery Kempe by scholars now gives way to uncertain, shifting categorizations of the published editions of the manuscript. The Book of Margery Kempe was now identified by critics and scholars as, variously, autobiography, biography, sociological extract, important human document and psychological case study.<sup>9</sup> Differences between the two published editions produced further complications. The 1936 modernized (language and spelling)

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<sup>8</sup> See 182.5-11. The withdrawal of the "gifts" by Christ at 155.28-31 is not represented as being in response to a specific request by Kempe.

<sup>9</sup> See O'Connell, Colledge, Thurston, Douie and Coleman for different categorizations of the text.

edition removed religious matters to an appendix where they appeared in small print, "creat[ing] the impression . . . that the work's interest was as social, not as religious, history" (Hirsh, Middle English Prose 109). The Meech and Allen edition kept the religious matters in place, but added extensive scholarly notes on the literary, religious and historical contexts of the work, and promised (though it was never completed) an entire additional volume setting out connections between the mode of religiosity in the manuscript and a Continental tradition of mysticism and women mystics.

One reason for the discomfort generated by unreconciled differences between various versions of The Book of Margery Kempe may have been a reluctant recognition on the part of early critics and scholars that mysticism itself could have more than one identity. Though it is primarily more recent critics who have concentrated on teasing out, examining and naming many different strands of medieval mystical practice,<sup>10</sup> approval or disapproval of various aspects of the piety represented in The Book of Margery Kempe by early critics also acknowledges, if only implicitly, distinct and differently valued forms of mysticism. When early critics

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<sup>10</sup> See Sarah Beckwith, Miri Rubin, Susan Dickman, Carolyn Bynum and Ute Stargardt for discussions of the text's "mysticisms", variously identified as negative, positive, affective, English, Continental, lay/secular and feminine/female.

take Margery Kempe to task for "emotional ebullience" (College 25), "exaltée piety" (Thurston 446) or lack of "intellectual depth" (Watkin 251), they are highlighting features of her piety which connect her to a specific tradition of mystical practice. Hope Emily Allen was perhaps unique among early critics in openly pointing to and emphasizing continuities between the mysticism in The Book of Margery Kempe and the practices of Continental women mystics. To place Kempe within this one pattern, however, seems at once to place her in opposition to, on the margins of, or outside other influential mystical traditions. Thus Allen is forced to conclude that ". . . Margery profoundly violated the principles of contemplation laid down by Hilton in his Scale of Perfection" (276)<sup>11</sup>, and Sigrid Undset's generally positive view of Kempe's mysticism adds that she "was no saint" and did not exhibit "the saint's absence of ego" (233).

As some critics see it, all the varied mystical practices current in late medieval society can be separated,

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<sup>11</sup> Allen's prefatory note to the scholarly edition comments on a shift in her own assessment of Kempe. Allen says "I do not believe that Margery's book can be explained, as I first thought, as merely the naive outburst of an illiterate woman, who had persuaded two pliant men to write down her egotistical reminiscences" (lvii). John C. Hirsh argues that Allen's initial concern with a continuity of native (English) contemplative tradition changed by "various influences" eventually gave way to her understanding that "the cross-currents of late medieval English tradition were more complex than she had earlier believed" (Middle English Prose 113).

ordered and subsumed under one or the other of two models of mysticism, derived from either 'negative' or 'positive' mystical traditions. Sarah Beckwith, in her recent analysis of the representation of mysticism, "A Very Material Mysticism," looks at the distinctions made between positive and negative mysticism. She says of positive mysticism (or "affective piety") that it "uses imagery and analogy to approximate and approach God, seeing the Incarnation as the type and legitimation of such symbolizing, the means through which God descends, and reciprocally the means of mystical ascent to God" (38). Co-existing with this "most popular and dominant form of late medieval piety" (39) is negative mysticism, which "abjures all symbol which it sees as necessarily inadequate" (39) and which relies on "self-emptying" as the means to unio mystica. There are a number of additional ways to construct models of "difference" in late medieval piety, many of them apparent in both early and recent criticism of The Book of Margery Kempe. R. M. Wilson makes a distinction between the mystic who was "sufficiently literate to write of his experiences in Latin", and the mystic ignorant of Latin, who was "necessarily silent" (89) until the development of vernacular religious prose. Other commentators distinguish a specifically "English" mysticism, implicitly contrasting its "depth of perception" and "wisdom of spiritual doctrine" (Knowles 139) with more emotional,

less intellectual Continental influences.<sup>12</sup> Early critics of The Book of Margery Kempe frequently criticised it in terms of this distinction between intellectual and non-intellectual mysticism noting that Margery's book did not contain "any teaching or message of enduring significance" or present "any spiritual truth in a new or more luminous light" (O'Connell 181). Hope Emily Allen, with her references to the "feminist" piety of Continental women mystics (lix), first introduced a category central to much recent criticism, that of "feminine" or "female" piety.

Most early and some recent critics express strong approval for, or at least deference to, certain formal aspects or elements associated with more traditionally valued forms of mysticism. There are many references in the critical literature to structured mystical practices, such as the "three-fold mystical way," stepping stones to mystical union with God, including a "period of purgation" and a "period of illumination" to be experienced by the mystic (Fries 220). Compliance with these formal aspects of mysticism is a serious issue with some critics; David Knowles notes with disapproval of Margery Kempe, that "none of her counsellors made a serious attempt to develop her spirituality on the lines laid down by Hilton" (149). Knowles also comments on the "failure on the part of a director to control or to eliminate what the masters of

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<sup>12</sup> See also Hope Emily Allen and Ute Stargardt.

mystical theology agree in considering undesirable elements in one who wishes to advance in purity of life and prayer." Ute Stargardt's analysis of a "decay in continental feminine mysticism"<sup>13</sup>, associated by her with a rise of lay piety during which mysticism becomes "a popular movement" (301), pays particular attention to the ways formal mystical concepts<sup>14</sup> become "misunderstood and misapplied" in the hands of later women mystics such as Margery Kempe.

When Sarah Beckwith notes that "generally, in the representation of mysticism, it is the negative mystical way that is the model of mysticism, privileged as the superior mode" (39), she underlines the fact that "differences" in any conceptual system have rarely been allowed to simply co-exist. The construction of a positive (valued) term depends on the repression of the other (35). When negative mysticism becomes valued by critics as superior, and conceived of, or identified with, mysticism as a whole, positive mysticism can only be seen as the "contamination" of true, "i.e. negative, mysticism" (39). Beckwith's analysis of the representation of mysticism offers a telling insight into the identity crisis caused by the sudden,

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<sup>13</sup> Specifically a Continental tradition of women mystics and 'speculative' mysticism originating with enclosed religious figures such as Hildegard of Bingen.

<sup>14</sup> Stargardt cites the concept of mystical participation in biblical events and the concept of mystical union, both of which women mystics, in her view, translate from spiritual concepts into "purely physical sensations and experiences" (293).

unexpected co-existence of differing versions of The Book of Margery Kempe. Wynkyn de Worde's treatise of abstract devotional passages, even though devoid of desired intellectual content, fits neatly into the model of negative mysticism; while many aspects of the manuscript version of The Book of Margery Kempe could only be explained in terms of the tradition of affective piety. The physically manifested piety of Margery Kempe, and her meditative imagery and devotion to the manhood of Christ, for example, gesture toward "decayed" Continental "female" mysticism<sup>15</sup>, as does her decision to remain uncloistered and active in the world. However, though Kempe knows and shows "all the motifs commonly associated with the tradition of pious women" (Dickman 158), this did not win the approbation of early critics. The "success" of the de Worde treatise as a mystical text concentrating on a basically unrepresentable and immaterial God (Beckwith 40) had depended on the absence or repression of representations of material existence and a material form of piety. The resurfacing of a manuscript

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<sup>15</sup> In meditative "homely" conversations, Kempe and Christ are depicted as if literally functioning in the social roles of husband and wife. Ute Stargardt comments that "Margery perceived the unio mystica as the human sex act, accordingly, Jesus behaves like a fleshly husband eager to enjoy his conjugal rights." The meditation sequences also include jarring (to some) physical detail and 'coarseness' of expression, such as a reference to Kempe "cleaving" to Christ "as þe skyn of stokfysch cleuyth to a mannys handys whan it is sothyn" (91.14-16), and Kempe's attempt to establish the concrete reality of her meditative vision of Christ by feeling and attesting to the physical reality of his toes.

that incorporated, and apparently simultaneously endorsed, more than one identifiable mode of mysticism necessitated more complex considerations of the identity of Margery Kempe and the 'authority' of the text.

### Chapter III: Subjectivity

Than on a Fryday befor Crystmes Day, as þis creatur, knelyng in a chapel of Seynt Iohn wythinne a cherch of Seynt Margrete in N., wept wondir sore, askyng mercy & forȝyfnes of hir synnes & hir trespas, owyr mercyful Lord Cryst Ihesu, blyssyd mot he be, rauysched hir spyryt & seyde on-to hir: 'Dowtyr, why wepyst þow so sor? I am comyn to þe, Ihesu Cryst, þa deyde on þe Crosse sufferyng byttyr peynes & passyons for þe. I, þe same God, forȝefe þe þi synnes to þe vtterest poynt.'" (The Book of Margery Kempe 16.27-35)

After the initial publication of the manuscript version of The Book of Margery Kempe, with its representation of the socially transacted mysticism of Margery Kempe, many critics have attempted to "place" Kempe at an appropriately modest level in a hierarchical structure of mysticism based on manuscript details of her self-involved, unpleasant, spiritually suspect and socially disruptive personality.<sup>1</sup> Kempe thus becomes identified through negative assessments of her personality as a "minor" mystic<sup>2</sup> and inadequate symbol of the connection between human and divine. The work's established identity as an appropriate and authoritative model of mysticism is thereby undermined. Even critics who wish to validate Kempe as a devout and

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<sup>1</sup> See Herbert Thurston on Kempe's "self-centred attitude of mind" (454). Hope Emily Allen calls Kempe "petty, neurotic, vain . . . physically and nervously overstrained" in addition to "devout, much travelled, forceful and talented" (lxiv). Enid Dinnis notes her repelling "coarseness" (95), and John R. O'Connell and Sigrid Undset, among others, note personality 'defects'.

<sup>2</sup> See Hope Emily Allen, John O'Connell, H.S. Bennett and David Knowles, all of whom identify Kempe as a minor or unsatisfactory mystic. More recently, John C. Hirsh terms her a 'paramystic'.

"true mystic" often concede her "defects" of personality, while others dismiss her outright as an unacceptable mystic.<sup>3</sup> The "personality" behind the writings is frequently characterized in psychoanalytic terms as "hysterical," though some simply call Kempe pathological or mad.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, though supposedly the primary issue in this criticism is whether the text represents an appropriate mystical consciousness, assessments of Kempe's spiritual effectiveness also involve examining her personal fitness for certain gender-related social or biological roles. Many critics have agreed with John Kempe that Margery was "no good wife"<sup>5</sup> in that she constantly campaigned for and finally won from her husband the right to live chaste.<sup>6</sup> And

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<sup>3</sup> John O'Connell, for eg., terms aspects of Kempe's piety "impressive" but also calls her "a supreme egoist" (177), and according to David Knowles, "Margery Kempe can only improperly and accidentally be classed among the English mystics" (149).

<sup>4</sup> See Coffman, Knowles, and more recently, Hirsh (in "Author and Scribe") for speculation on the extent of involvement of the scribes; Thurston refers to Kempe's "terrible hysteria" (446), Sigrid Unset calls her a "pronounced psychopath" (236) and according to Donald Howard "she was quite mad" (34).

<sup>5</sup> See Collis (140), Goodman (352), Howard (34) and Fienberg (138).

<sup>6</sup> Kempe's campaign includes warning her husband of God's promise to slay him, or at least his sexual desire (a fifteenth century emendation accepted by some editors), if sexual relations between the couple do not cease. Kempe's later, rather involuntary, return to the role of wife after John Kempe is injured in old age and becomes incapacitated is applauded by many critics as a sign of either her basic good character, or of her eventual spiritual maturity. See Coleman (170), Dinnis (92), Colledge (20) and Mueller (67).

the manuscript's sparing reference to her children<sup>7</sup> caused critics to speculate about how many died in infancy or childhood and whether Kempe appropriately delayed her spiritual activities until her children were grown or no longer in need of her. For many of these critics, Margery Kempe's personal "failings" make her an unsatisfactory member of society and, perhaps paradoxically, an unsatisfactory mystic.

However, this critical concern with the issue of Margery Kempe's personality depends on a particular humanist view of the "self", which conceives it as a stable and unified entity "having" experiences, personality, sexuality and even authority (Cameron 118). The humanist "self," then, is permanent and unchanging, pre-existing language and discourse (Leicester 14). The humanist self operates with an almost unlimited "agency" as it pursues personally determined social, economic, psychological or spiritual goals. This model of the self has led critics to praise or blame Margery Kempe according to the supposed success or failure of her efforts to appropriate, through her self-representation as mystic and mystical writer, the authority vested in a spiritual identity or mystical consciousness.

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<sup>7</sup> The short second book of the manuscript begins with a 'parable' on the conversion of Kempe's adult son from an evil way of life. The text provides no details of the other thirteen children given birth to by Kempe. See Fries (231) and Lucas (302) for speculation about Kempe's role as a mother.

Recent theory has challenged the humanist "monolithic" view of the self, as it has also called into question similarly unified and monolithic views of mysticism, identity and even authority itself. And the more complex understandings of the subject offered by current subject theory can usefully complicate the rather simple structures of praise and blame operating in earlier (and even more recent) humanist criticism.

In the more interesting examples of recent Margery Kempe criticism, consideration of personality gives way to an interest in the text's representation of "subjectivity". As H. Marshall Leicester points out, "It is common nowadays . . . to avoid expressions like self, person, and living character and to replace them with the term subject." This term "subject", as used in modern theory, acknowledges that there are "aspects of someone's situation that he or she does not originate or fully control . . . aspects of experience to which someone is subject." A subject is "not a substantial thing, like a rock, but . . . a position in a larger structure, a site through which various forces pass." Various subjects are constructed by modern theoretical disciplines, including

the grammatical subject, a place in discourse governed from outside itself by rules of language . . . the psychoanalytic subject . . . a location of unconscious desire, and the social subject . . . an institutional construct—a role, a status, a member of a class . . . .(14)

This understanding of subjectivity as a varying and variable

product (or by-product) of "all the forces in play at the subject site" counters the humanist or "essentialist" view of the self as a stable identity introduced into and autonomously operating within social, psychological or linguistic environments. In modern theory, the unity of the subject is exposed as false, and the subject's agency, or as Sarah Beckwith puts it, "our ability to inhabit our cultures as participants" (173), is restricted, sometimes severely, as theories emphasize various systems and structures responsible for the constitution of the subject within a text.

The most significant modern theoretical approaches offering insight into the key issues of identity, authority and gender in The Book of Margery Kempe have been Marxist literary theory and psychoanalytic subject theory. Models of subjectivity proposed in these theories inform, and perhaps direct, the observations of some critics who have recently looked at The Book of Margery Kempe. Both theories have a particular interest in critiquing and discarding the "self-certain" and autonomous humanist subject.<sup>8</sup> However,

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<sup>8</sup> The humanist subject is also the target of deconstruction's critique of western philosophic tradition, which has attempted to expose the stable identity of the subject as guaranteed only by its domination of an inferior or marginalized 'other', the necessary opposing term in hierarchical categories of thought. The project of deconstruction is to undo hierarchical oppositions by identifying ways in which the privileged, central term is dependent upon or embedded in the term of the opposition. The unseverable but 'unfixed' relation between the central term and the 'other' makes the identity of either uncertain.

while Marxist and psychoanalytic theory are not primarily interested in whether the mystic in a mystical text manifests an appropriate mystical consciousness, these theories, as applied to The Book of Margery Kempe, suggest that a text's subject may be expected to manifest a theoretically appropriate subjectivity.

In Marxist social theory, the concept of alienation exposes the "false unity" of the humanist subject.<sup>9</sup> Workers are alienated from the product of their labor, from themselves, from other human beings, and from nature because of the de-humanizing relations of production in capitalist society. In consequence they lose the "unity and wholeness" of human existence (Tong 44). The concept of the unified subject is therefore retained in Marxism, but only as something once had, or as the historical future of human existence. This social subject is without agency, completely determined by the economic and historical forces of capitalist society. Sheila Delany, working from a position within Marxist social theory, sees the determining factors of subjectivity in The Book of Margery Kempe as social and economic, pointing to evidence of the internalization by Margery Kempe of the values and processes of capitalism, and of a "sexual economics" which brings her

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See Johnathan Culler for an outline of the project and practice of deconstruction.

<sup>9</sup> See Rosemarie Tong 42-45 for an outline of the Marxist theory of society.

"no profit and large loss" (79). Delany's description of class struggle in the medieval town of Lynn depicts Margery Kempe as a member of an advantaged class, the bourgeoisie, but oppressed within that class (88) and alienated by "her perception of herself as property," especially sexual property (85). Kempe's pervasive economic consciousness is inevitably transposed into a "spiritual economics," in which "good deeds and prayer" are "invested" and produce "an enviable profit in heaven" (87). Delany detects a "quality of personal agony" (82) and a "dominant tone of . . . anxiety" (87) in The Book of Margery Kempe. Though religion is to be "Margery's way of asserting her ownership of herself" (91) and is therefore her bid for agency, Kempe's strategy, as Delany sees it, is "doomed to failure" because "social conditions did not yet exist for the emancipation of women" (92). While Delany's reading of Margery Kempe as a social subject oppressed by the determining economic and social forces of her proto-capitalist society offers new perspectives on inclusion in the text of material aspects of mysticism, it does not invite complicated considerations of identity, authority or gender as represented in the text. Though subject to the divisions of alienation, Kempe's identity is viewed by Delany as historically "fixed" and is not open to uncertainty or to the negotiations of agency. Authority seems uniformly to be that which oppresses or opposes Kempe, and gender figures in Delany's account only

as a particular vehicle of oppression.

Psychoanalytic theory<sup>10</sup> offers another version of subjectivity conceived as a split subject produced as a consequence of "lack" and dispersed across sites of psychological operation, namely (in the Freudian version) the ego, the unconscious and the superego. The Oedipal complex initiates subjectivity by interrupting a dyadic relationship between mother and infant (Eagleton 154) which recognizes no split between the self and other. The dyad is shattered by the child's recognition of itself as an object, actually a misrecognition by the child of a mirror-image of "self" perceived as a whole, unified entity (Eagleton 165). Despite the mirrored image of unity, the subject is constituted through its lack or loss of a desired object, initially the mother. Incestuous desire for the mother is given up and repressed (initiating the unconscious) under the perceived threat of castration by the father. The child's submission to the "Law of the Father" brings about entry into the "symbolic order" of language and society, which is a "system of relationships, interrelated signs, roles and rituals which regulate individuals and social relations" (Tong 220). The split subject produced on entry into the symbolic order lacks agency, being cut off from but

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<sup>10</sup> See Terry Eagleton 151-193 for an outline of psychoanalytic subject. See Rosemarie Tong 139-172, Juliet Mitchell 1-26, and Jacqueline Rose 27-57 for outlines of gender and the psychoanalytic subject.

subject to the desires and drives of an autonomously operating unconscious.

Psychoanalytic subject theory also offers an explanation of the construction of gender in (or as) subjectivity. Masculine and feminine identities are the product of differing experiences and/or resolutions of the castration complex, in which gender difference is a consequence of having or not having the phallus, sign of the Law of the Father and of the symbolic order. Identification with the father secures access to the symbolic order and to a subjecthood and individuality that "internalizes the dominant order" (Tong 221). To not have the phallus means that the individual "cannot fully accept and internalize the Symbolic Order," and must therefore either (in some readings) be confined to its margins, or (in some readings) be repressed within the Symbolic Order, "forced into it unwilling." The primary agency permitted the gendered subject in psychoanalytic subject theory is the choice, allowed for in some but not all critical positions within psychoanalytic subject theory, of a non-biologically based "masculine" or "feminine" position in respect to the symbolic order. The feminine position, with its problematic relation to the dominant order and power, is connected by some theorists to another order, the semiotic, centred in the body and offering the possibility of a language of the body.

Nancy Partner's psychoanalytic reading of The Book of Margery Kemp thus looks for evidence of the role of sexuality and the unconscious as determinants of the subjectivity represented in the text. Partner describes Kempe as "a woman who could not remain satisfied with her social role as wife and mother, and yet refused to conform to the only other acceptable alternative career, that of an enclosed religious life" (32). Arguing that Kempe's sexuality "was central to her sense of identity," Partner identifies sexuality as "the compelling force which governed her imagination and passions" (54). This feminine sexuality constructs Kempe as hysterical, and subject to a "psychic masochism" (57) played out in her sexually explicit spiritual meditations and in the sexually-related physical manifestations of her mysticism. Kempe's "impetuous ambitions and thwarted desires," among them, Partner speculates, an incompletely repressed desire for her father, and her "failed attempts at self-repression" result in her "psychopathology" (65). Rebellious, but helpless before psychoanalytic forces, the Margery Kempe of Partner's analysis inevitably fails "to turn her private experiences into a foundation for social authority and prestige" (65).

The readings of The Book of Margery Kempe based in Marxist and psychoanalytic theory introduce critical consideration of extra-personal social and psychological factors that contribute to subjectivity and its

representation in The Book of Margery Kempe. Accordingly, Delany and Partner concentrate on exactly those details of the manuscript version of the work dismissed as disconcerting and inappropriate by early critics. Yet from this evidence, with models of the social or psychoanalytic subject in mind, both Delany and Partner explain subjectivity in The Book of Margery Kempe in ways that exclude or discount any possible agency on the part of the subject. Kempe is identified by these critics as primarily a helpless victim of oppressive social or psychological structures, denied access to an available authority that would guarantee her social and psychological success. However, the conclusions offered in readings of The Book of Margery Kempe such as those of Partner and Delany are reductive in that they do not provide a sufficiently complex understanding of the text's rich or even "thick"<sup>11</sup> representation of a "dynamic constitutive" (Beckwith 179) interaction between self and society which brings into being subjectivity, authority and agency. Theoretical models that pre-determine and "fix" the outcome of social practices or the operation of family relations and the unconscious mind cannot account for a text which refuses to privilege theory over practice, or to assign to theory alone the power to "decide" the identity and operation of any agent or agency

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<sup>11</sup> See Clifford Geertz's discussion of the place of "thick description" in his formulation of an "interpretive theory" of culture.

within the text. Mysticism, subjectivity, the mystical text and authority are all represented as coming into being and actively participating within a mutually conditioning web of social groups, religious institutions, literary conventions and conditions of production.

The identity crisis fostered by awareness of two versions of The Book of Margery Kempe was based on critics' belief that the newly discovered manuscript compromised the authority of de Worde's condensed version of the work without itself offering a sufficiently authoritative (or authoritarian) representation of mysticism. As conceived by these critics, the role of authority was to guarantee and police unified monolithic conceptions of mysticism and the mystical writer. This did not, however, seem to be the role played by authority as represented in the manuscript. As a way of approaching the "problem" of authority in The Book of Margery Kempe, it may be useful to consider Michel Foucault's reminder that the use of the "author-function" as a legally codified guarantor of the unity of a work and an author is relatively recent (124). With respect to the practices of modern textual criticism and editing, Robert Sturges has suggested that:

The location of power and authority in an individual as producer of the literary work, rather than in the community of which he or she is a part, and the valorization of the work itself as an unchanging, autonomous object...are ideological . . . promoting a view of literary authority as centralized and exclusive rather than as disseminated throughout a society. (112)

Although medieval literary theory, such as that codified by St Jerome (Foucault 128), subscribes to the idea of the stability and stabilizing function of "author" and "authority," the practice of medieval literary production, that is, the production of literature in manuscript form, according to Sturges, "always had the potential for detachment of work from author and for the interpenetration of work with work" (114). This meant that works "necessarily became less and less stable, less and less authoritative, and more and more open to other works, other versions: to the free play of writing" (114-15). In the "deconstructive" free play of writing, "the medieval author tends to dissolve into a literary community, and it is the community as a whole that produces the work . . ." (116).

If this medieval free-play in the production of "works" can be extended to the construction of subjects and authority as well, the twentieth-century "identity crisis" of The Book of Margery Kempe can be seen as having been produced by a critical practice which ignored "a great cultural gulf" between itself and medieval literary practice. Sturges' model suggests that in medieval terms a text is not a unified, permanent and unchanging cultural artifact; it is a temporarily held position in an ongoing process of literary construction and deconstruction. The signs or signals of the constructedness of the medieval text need not be cues for crisis, but can be taken as

acknowledgement of extra-personal contributions, social or community participation, in the production of a work. To understand the identity and operation of "authority" in a medieval text may then involve looking for ways in which that text resists the status of revealed natural object and evades the imposition of stabilizing certainties.

#### Chapter IV: The Problem of Authority

"Sche had ful greet envye at hir neybowrs þat þei schuld ben arayd so wel as sche. All hir desyr was for to be worshepd of þe pepul. Sche wold not be war be onys chastysyng ne be content wyth þe goodys þat God had sent hire . . . but euyr desyryd mor & mor." (The Book of Margery Kempe 9.25-31)

The manuscript's early inscription of Margery Kempe's desire to be "respected" (as the Penguin edition translates it) is certainly one reason recent critical attention has focused on the issue or problem of authority in The Book of Margery Kempe. The text has often been taken as strategic self-representation (or polemic) on the part of Margery Kempe, employed to effect her appropriation of an authority vested in the identities of author and mystic. Authority does seem to be a promise held out within late medieval society to those who occupy such positions, even if mysticism and mystical writings are often understood as marginal to the (in some readings) centralized and exclusively stabilizing structures of late medieval authority, pre-eminently the Church and its established rituals and practices.<sup>1</sup> However, a desire to understand the

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<sup>1</sup> The degree of mysticism's marginality to the dominant culture seems related to specific models or types of mystical practice. See Ute Stargardt who outlines a model of historical transition in which mysticism, having originated within Church institutions (eg. "female" piety in convents), later escaped direct church control, became popular and therefore marginal to Church hierarchy and rituals - though perhaps never completely free from attempts by centralized religious structures to control or police its activities.

identity and operation of authority in the late medieval social order as something fixed, unassailable and "whole," confronts a number of problems, among them a need to account for apparently opposing but co-existing forces, some of which, like the development of the priesthood<sup>2</sup>, appear to work in the service of consolidating and exclusive authority structures, while others like mysticism, and especially "popular" mysticism, suggest that authority may be other than monolithic and perhaps more accessible.

Models of authority inform the critical positions of Karma Lochrie and Sarah Beckwith, both of whom have produced articles dealing with the problem of authority in The Book of Margery Kempe. In Lochrie's reading of the text, a (successful) quest for the "object" authority is undertaken by a remarkably autonomous and instrumental authoring/authored self acting upon a quiescent social, material (and even spiritual) background. Lochrie's female agent of change engages with, while keeping separate from, a static structure of authority, reversing, repositioning or realigning authoritative elements into a more satisfactory configuration that allows Margery Kempe to secure for herself the identities of mystic and author.

Lochrie's arguments for Margery Kempe's authority as a mystic and writer show an awareness of an academically and theologically based medieval theory of authorship, in which

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<sup>2</sup> See Miri Rubin, 49-51.

to have worth "a literary text had to conform . . . with Christian truth" (Minnis 10), while to be authentic, "writing had to be the genuine production of a named auctor" (Minnis 11). In this theory of authorship, authority is reified as discrete, portable units contained or possessed in biblical writings, in the approved (that is, morally worthy) writings of the ancients, and in the writings of the Church Fathers, especially those of Augustine and Jerome. To be "respected and believed," the medieval writer must extract these units of auctoritas and deploy them in new writings which will then be underwritten by, as they will underwrite, the authority of the past. As an illiterate middle-class medieval (chaste) wife, the important obstacles to Kempe's authority in this system of authorship are her illiteracy and her position as "a woman on the margin of church and society" (34). But in Lochrie's reading, these liabilities become assets when Kempe takes on the identity of mystic. Margery Kempe's self-presentation as a mystic seems automatically to provide the authority that allows her to successfully impose herself upon the dominant structures of her society as authoritative. Through mysticism, Kempe is able to take advantage of her position "outside the world" (37) to undertake a "radical kind of appropriation" of textual authorities such as St Jerome and St Paul, authorities who would seem to impede authorization of

important features of her piety<sup>3</sup> but who are read or re-read themselves in her mystical meditations as endorsing her spiritual identity. Kempe goes on to "reverse" every potential impediment to authority, answering Church officials and clerics with "good wordys," despite her illiteracy, and rewriting the hostility of her community as proof of her successful imitation of Christ and her access to grace. Lochrie's Margery Kempe clearly provides an example of the unlimited agency and authority of the autonomous subject in action.

Sarah Beckwith in "Problems of Authority in Late Medieval English Mysticism: Language, Agency and Authority in The Book of Margery Kempe" attempts to find a middle way between the "overwhelmingly confident" humanist subject and the subject of modern theory, so often conceived of as having no agency. Her model for constructing subjectivity, authority and the flow of agency between them is Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of dialogism, which conceives of the operation of authority in social relations as a fixed opposition between compacted and monologic forces of authority and countering dialogic pressures, both located in "the word," that is, in language and discourse. The authoritative word confronts and opposes the subject, who responds either by acquiescing in that word's authority, or

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<sup>3</sup> Her public speaking, copious tears, non-virgin status and uncloistered life.

by dialogically resisting authority (Bakhtin 348). This resistance to authority is historically specific, and Beckwith points to particular features of medieval mysticism and its historical/social context which she believes allow for dialogic confrontation. There are contradictions, Beckwith finds, in both the project of mysticism and the overarching ideology of a particular historical moment that produces the mystic and the mystical text. Beckwith points to an inherent double-voicedness of mysticism and its drama of two separate voices, those of the mystic and of God, and argues that this double-voicedness works against mysticism's claim to produce an authoritative "echoic repetition of God's voice" (174). The "homly" conversations between Margery Kempe and God in The Book of Margery Kempe enact the "dialogic potentialities" of mystic discourse, with the soul answering back, rather than simply transmitting God's authoritative word (183). The social context of a changing relation between laity and clergy following on the rise of lay piety (186) and a crisis in (or failure of) authority resulting from a break up of monopoly of clerical culture are two additional reasons Beckwith advances for proposing dialogism as the model of the interaction between self and society in The Book of Margery Kempe.

Beckwith sets aside the history of criticism, hostile and laudatory, that concentrates on Kempe's personality and shifts her focus to the "real target of criticism," the

dialogic process of self-making, self-production and self-authorization everywhere evident in the text. She argues that the "fraud" and "inauthenticity" associated with Margery Kempe and the text are "less a function of Kempe's personality . . . than a condition of subjectivity" (179), that is, a function of dialogic resistance to authority. Beckwith does not intend that her analysis of the construction of subjectivity in The Book of Margery Kempe simply reverse Lochrie's model of the subject by offering a self that is a "mere passive . . . victim" (198) unable to recognize, and certainly unable to resist or manipulate the social structures that construct her. However, her dialogic scheme for understanding the interaction of authority and subjectivity does tend to reduce subjectivity to a single, unified "medieval subject," and to subsume or fix all forms of and relations to power into a pattern of oppressive confrontation and "historically conscious" resistance. Margery Kempe's agency as a subject, in Beckwith's reading, is the sum of a limited number of dynamic contradictions in action within the social institutions, historical moment and discourse of a late medieval religious culture experiencing a "fracturing of authority" (180). Within this schematic of social dynamics, the repositioning of authority is according to the will of historical imperative rather than, as in Lochrie, at the will of the autonomous subject.

In Beckwith's attempt to formulate an understanding of

authority that allows the subject a degree of agency, she employs the concept of "practical consciousness" to designate an historical consciousness, acting in and through the subject, which accounts for change in society (172). I believe that Beckwith's use of the term does not take into account Anthony Giddens' concept of the "duality" of (social) structure, as both "medium and outcome" of the reproduction of practices (5), and his view that "social systems have no purposes, reasons or needs . . . only human individuals do so" (7). Giddens' practical consciousness describes the fact that "every social actor knows a great deal about the conditions of reproduction of the society of which he or she is a member" (5), and may therefore have the capability or agency of "intervening, or refraining from intervening in a series of events . . . to influence their course." (256) His notion of "structuration" understands authority and power as potential resources "drawn upon by agents" (257) rather than as fixed elements in a pattern of oppression and resistance. Giddens' theorization of the interaction between the self and society acknowledges the recursiveness of social practices but asserts a more open-ended, flexible process for pursuing interests and goals than is allowable under Beckwith's dialogic model. His concept of social structure suggests that authority and power may be understood as "not a single system of power dominating the powerless but a tangle of distinct and

variable relations of power and points of resistance" (de Lauretis 131), while his practical consciousness suggests the potential agency of a subject offered multiple positions in society. This theoretical position, which proposes neither the humanist autonomous subject wilfully operating outside society nor a subject completely determined in the flow of social and historical forces, can better account for the mobility and indeterminacy of authority, and authority's unstable by-product, identity, in The Book of Margery Kempe.

Authority as represented in The Book of Margery Kempe is not easily or automatically secured. The text itself does not fit neatly within medieval models of authorship; it is not firmly connected to a properly named author whose "worth" could alone determine the matter of authority. The text refers to "this creature" as having experienced the recorded life events and spiritual revelations, and to a priest-scribe as having transcribed or rewritten another scribe's poorly executed version of the work. In its mysticism, the text gestures toward divine authorship, but also refers to and makes use of a list of humanly mediated mystical texts. These partial, incomplete, non-specific and indirect ascriptions of authorship represent authority as dispersed and intermittent: it is not apparent that any one authority continuously controls or answers for every element within the text.

The undecidable authorship of The Book of Margery Kempe

is only one indication of the undecidedness of authority within the text. Margery Kempe's appearances before English ecclesiastical officials also make clear the simultaneous pervasiveness and elusiveness of authority. Worried by her disruptive "spiritual gifts," by her public ministry of "good wordys" directed against clerical infractions like swearing and fashionable dress, and likely by her "spiritual" travelling and evident unpopularity with certain segments of the community, these authorities act (or attempt) to discipline and police, at some points, and to authorize, at other points, her mode of behavior and form of piety. In a series of chapters (45-55) organized around the more serious confrontations, Margery Kempe is pursued by or brought before such officials as the Bishop of Worcester, the Mayor and Steward of Leicester, the Archbishop of York, the Duke of Bedford's men, and for a second time before the Archbishop of York. After examining her and obtaining verbal confirmation of her theological orthodoxy, these men ask Kempe to produce, or send her in search of, concrete authorization for her travelling (a letter of permission from her husband), for her conduct (a testimony from "my Lady of Westmoreland") and for her mode of dress and behavior (the letter and seal of the Archbishop of Canterbury). That authority in these cases presents itself as an object -- and a portable one at that -- is clear, but even in concrete form, authority is not a secure possession.

The various letters of permission, exculpation, testimony or documentation referred to or executed in the text do not always manifest or effect authority in their simple existence. The authority of the letter and ring from the Archbishop of Canterbury can expire, for example, and must be renewed (136.13-25). A man bearing the Archbishop of York's letter can depart without leaving it in your possession (135.6-12), or an officer may not wait for a letter to be produced before arresting a suspected Lollard and her husband (137.1). A quest for the object authority in the represented life events and mystical practice of The Book of Margery Kempe may, then, yield only partial, intermittent and unsustainable results, because much that is in the text suggests that authority is not a fixed, continuously operating structure, container for the social/historical context, nor necessarily a discrete personal possession that the "self" may introduce at will into social relations. Rather, authority is shown to be generated by, and constituted in, the present moment of social interaction, not something found but something that happens.

The Proem to The Book of Margery Kempe, which promises that an unstable identity can be made stable through divine mercy (and authority), nevertheless acknowledges more than one way of understanding identity and the operation of authority. Written by Margery Kempe's second scribe, a

priest, the Proem sets out its project of presenting for the example and instruction of sinful wretches the narrative portrait of one sinful wretch who is moved by God's grace to enter into mysticism's "wey of hy perfeccyon" and to practice the mystical behaviors of meditation, contemplation and "wonderful spechys & dalyawns" with God (2.32). God's grace, manifested in the miraculous transformations which take place in the life of Margery Kempe, is offered as a sign of the authenticity of the text, a reason for it to be respected and believed. God's pity and compassion for his "creatur" moves him to turn her life "vp-so-down", changing "helth in-to sekenesse, prosperyte in-to aduersyte, worshep in-to repref, & love in-to hatered" (1.24-26). After considering this evidence of God's grace (and power), the creature turns to Holy Church, humbles herself in confession, within a 'schort tyme' experiences tears of contrition, and begins the spiritual progression which is the project of mysticism (2.20-24). As depicted in this sequence of events, God remains transcendent, apart from this world yet is miraculously able to intervene at will to change, rearrange, and reverse the components and pattern of his creature's lived experience. His direct, transforming intervention (which requires or allows only one appropriate response on the part of the soon-to-be mystic) is an appropriate sign of the authority of both mystic and mystical work.

However, it requires a persistently careful (and reductive) reading strategy to accept the project of either the Proem or the text it introduces as an unproblematic depiction of a single-minded, consistently pursued and unarguably successful spiritual life and identity. Co-existing with the Proem's revealed objective of setting an example and its simply sketched pattern of mystical practice, are indications (more prominent in the remainder of the text) of the complications and contradictions of a life lived very much within society and social relations. Though the Proem's synopsis of Margery Kempe's introduction to mysticism and her subsequent mystical life seems to acknowledge a theoretical design for what should happen, and how, when human and divine come into contact through the vehicle of mysticism, the practical execution of that design is shown to be less than simple, less than certain.

It becomes apparent that to "unfix" Margery Kempe from her pre-conversion identity as a "synful" medieval wife and to secure for her the respect and believability appropriate (even promised) to an authorized spiritual identity requires more than a single intervention by a unified, transcendent divine authority. This transformation will necessarily involve continuing interaction with a tangle of socially-based, variously powerful and differently interested arbiters of Kempe's spiritual worth. For after focusing on the single and singular authorization of Margery Kempe

provided by God's "grace," the text records a series of journeys to "many worshepful clerkys, bothe archebyssshopys & bysshoppys, doctowrs of dyuynyte, and bachelers also" in which Kempe enlists the assistance of the religious institution and community in establishing her spiritual identity, seeking and obtaining assurances that her mystical experiences are not "illusyons & deceytys of hyr gostly enmys" (3.8-9). A one-to-one relationship between mystic and God is admittedly compromised (or at least complicated) by this sort of "diversion," which suggests that the divine itself is not fixed and central, but must be sought in multiple locations. But if Margery Kempe is to be a mystic in and not apart from the world, she must be held out as a spiritual sign or symbol, publicly available to be read, interpreted and valued from a number of differently situated positions, with no guarantee that those who evaluate her will voice a consensus in favor of the spiritual identity and authority divinely promised her. It is therefore not surprising that the text admits that "sum men seyden" of Kempe's initial spiritual gift of tears that "sche myght wepen whan sche wold" (2.22-23), that, in other words, the instrumentality of Kempe is suspected where there should be (in theory) only the instrumentality of God. Even at this early point in the text, it is clear that, for the subject Margery Kempe, authority is something that must be constantly attempted, rather than something either fully

achieved, or entirely absent.

The consistent practice of the text is compulsively to include, record and engage with (though, despite the text's reputation as polemic, not always to win over) every voice that speaks to the issue of the authority of Margery Kempe. The text, especially the Proem, does at times gesture toward a stabilizing "good" reading of Kempe, and against an equally stable, if opposite, "evil" reading. Karma Lochrie has argued that, in proposing good and evil readings of the text as a test revealing the activity (or lack) of grace in the reader "rather than the truth of the narrative or the life" (33), the Proem becomes a rhetorically authorizing allegory of right reading that establishes "Kempe's authority as an author" (37). But if a purely good or authorizing reading is the project of the text, that goal surely could have been better effected by either eliminating alternative interpretations of events, action and behavior from the text or by appropriating them so that they appear to align with and underwrite Kempe's "fixed" spiritual identity and authority. That the text ensures, rather than eliminates, supplementary interpretations, suggests that the text acknowledges, accepts and perhaps even delights in a collaborative free play of meanings with multiple possibilities of authority and identity.

The text proper begins in Chapter One with a parable-like recounting of a forestalled confession; Margery Kempe's

first directly represented engagement with institutional authority. The devil having told her that "hir nedyd no confessyon but don penawns be hir-self a-loone" (7.2-4), Kempe for some period attempts to autonomously, privately deal with "a thyng in conscyens." When believing herself to be near death after childbirth, however, she seeks to unburden herself to her confessor, only to be left uncomforted and unconfessed by his disapproving response to the partial revelations of her "sin." Unable to maintain an autonomous position outside the institutional practices of the Church, or to access a position within those practices, "þis creatur" goes "owt of hir mende" (7.21).

Kempe's madness is represented as the least powerful and least authoritative identity available within -- or without -- her society. It is experienced as an almost total loss of authority and power for the self and a corresponding oppressive assertion of power on the part of others. It is characterized by its extreme immobility. Margery Kempe, deprived of the household keys that symbolize her position and (relative) authority as wife, is "bowndyn & kept wyth strength boþe day & nyght" and cannot "haue hir wylle" (8.6-8). Her "wylle" is apparently to engage in bizarre behavior which alternates between aggression toward others, such as slandering her husband and friends and speaking "many a repreuows worde and many a schrewyd worde" (7.34-35), and self-aggression, in which she "wold a fordon

hir-self many a tym . . . bot hir owen hand . . . vyolently . . . [and] roof hir skyn on hir body . . . wyth hir nayles spetowsly" (8.1-5). It requires the direct intervention of Christ, as a vision at Kempe's bedside "clad in a mantyl of purpyl sylke" and speaking the words "why hast þou forsakyn me, and I forsoke neuyr þe?," to restore Kempe's pre-madness identity, leaving her as "stabelyd in hir wyttys & in hir reson as wel as euыр sche was be-forn" (8.26-27).

On one level, this parable of madness is a warning about the consequence of unorthodox religious belief and practice, and is therefore a sample of the theological orthodoxy of the text, but it also carries supplementary meanings having to do with authority as the guarantor of identity. The components of Kempe's mad behavior interestingly resemble those of mystical behavior, either her own mystical gifts and practice or those of some of her Continental mystical models. Madness and mysticism become evil and good readings of Kempe's behavior. Authority quite literally "binds" Kempe to the identity of madwoman, and it requires miraculous intervention to "unfix" her from this powerless position. Though a "fixed" spiritual identity has been promised Kempe, given this representation of mysticism's not completely repressed "other", a fixed identity may not be as desirable in practice as it is in theory. What may be authorized in this text is a mutability which resists the imposition of any "certain" identity and a

mobility which refuses the restraint of a determinable location, but which makes the subject available whenever and wherever authority may happen.

An incident near the end of the second part of the text is suggestive. In old age, Kempe returns through London from her last recorded foreign pilgrimage and encounters there a version of her identity circulating as a "proverb" in that and, Kempe suggests, other communities. Trying to remain anonymous because "sche was not clad as sche wold a ben" (243.14-15), Kempe holds a handkerchief to her face as she joins with a group of people for a meal. But she is still "supposed" to be "Mar. Kempe of Lynne" (243.19), the one reference to her name in the text. Words attributed to Kempe -- "A, þu fals flesch, þu xalt no good mete etyn" -- are used to identify her as a hypocrite in her spiritual fasting behavior. But Kempe is represented as available and able to intervene at the site of this production or reproduction of identity, introducing into the moment of social interaction and inscribing into the text a resistance to the fixing authority of those words. The words of the hypocrite do not originate with her "self," and are not "owned" by Kempe. They are presented by her as detached and simply available in community discourse, to be employed there by others who will not originate or "own" them, but who simply make use of them. As the text records:

. . . sum seydyn þe wordys þe wech arn be-forn-  
wretyn, & al was fals, but } et wer þei not

forȝeyn: þei wer rehersyd in many a place wher  
schē was neuyr kyd ne knowyn. (244.7-10)

The identity of Margery Kempe remains uncertain and contested at this late point in the text.

There are much earlier signals in the text of a continuing (and collaborative) "process of conflict and contradiction" (Cameron 118) which creates and recreates the identity of Margery Kempe. There is, for example, the "miracle" of the stone and beam. Sometime after her spiritual conversion, a stone and beam fall on Margery Kempe from the roof of a church in which she was worshipping, causing her great pain that is instantly relieved on her crying out "Ihesu, mercy" (21.30,22.1). A number of layers of reception of this miracle are acknowledged in the text. Kempe's own response to the "gret noyse & a dredful" that precedes the fall of stone and beam is dismay, as "þe voys of þe pepyl" has said that "God schuld take veniawns vp-on hir." God's authoritative word is inscribed into the text, assuring Kempe that she can "Helde þis for a gret myracle, &, ȝyf þe pepyl wyl not leuyn þis, I schal werkyn meche mor" (22.9-10). But God's is not the final "fixing" word for the identity of the event. A non-transcendant authority, the "worschepful doctowr of dyuynite" (22.11), busily sets about measuring and weighing the physical "accidents" of the miracle, trying thereby to "fix" the substance of its sign. But despite God's word and the weights and measures of Church authority, the text does not

move to a consensus on the meaning of stone and beam. God's own words draw attention to his potential inability to effect a closure of meaning; within themselves they incorporate, but do not displace, the possibility that "people will not believe." The worshipful doctor's publication of the physical dimensions of the "miracle" has no universal effect, and the passage ends with the representation of differing meanings for the event and contradictory identities for Margery Kempe:

And þis worshepful doctowr seyde it was a gret myracle . . . and teld it mech pepyl, & mych pepyl magnyfied mech God in þis creatur. And also mech pepyl wold not leuyn it, but rapar leuyd it was a tokyn of wreth & veniawns þan þei wold leuyn it was any token of mercy er quemfulnes. (22.18-25)

Kempe's spiritual identity is never more than an intermittent, partial and contested proposition of the text. And yet, producing even this unstable "self" demands constant activity in initiating, maintaining and repairing relations with various potential sources of authority and authorization in the community. Kempe must keep a constant check on her identity to see whether it is in place and to counter mis-identification by others. In addition to her appearances before various church officials who examine her for orthodoxy, and her continuing consultations with spiritual advisors (Julian of Norwich among them) for validation of her meditative visions, the text also records Kempe's various engagements with confessors, advisors, priestly advocates, clerical opponents, female saints and a

literary tradition of mystical texts. This marshalling of and interaction with supposed or proposed agents of spiritual authority is the substance of Kempe's mystical practice.

Texts or saints which may authorize elements of Kempe's spiritual behavior or mode of life are inscribed in the text, some of them more than once and in strategic positions. References to specific texts of mystical writings by authors such as Hilton and Rolle appear several times. And the scribal account of the life of Mary of Oignes enters the text at an opportune moment, justifying for the wavering priest-scribe Margery's disruptive tears and cries, recently preached against by a "good frere" of great fame and favor with the people (152.29-37, 153.1-8). A reference to St Bridget of Sweden becomes an opportunity for God to advise Kempe that she can ensure and underwrite St Bridget's reputation and authority (47.31-35). Elements of authority are collected, even piled up, as evidence, as if the sheer number (as with the weights and measures of the "miracle") will add up to authorization of Kempe's spiritual identity. No matter how many samples or examples are presented, the text refers to more, to an unrepresentable stock of authority, with the weary scribe asserting at one point "It wer in maner vn-possibyl to writyn al þe holy thowtys, holy spechys, and þe hy reuelacyons which owr Lord schewyd vn-to hir . . ." (144.7-9).

However, the text's inclusion of every possible source, form, element or avenue of authority compromises the effectiveness of any one, including the authority of the divine, which should manifest itself in and through the mystical text. The boundless authority and grace of God promised in the Proem are not delivered by the text's represented God/Christ. The ceaseless activity of Margery Kempe and the narrative mode of the text are obstacles to any direct, unimpeded display of divine instrumentality. Margery is seen taking care of all the practical aspects of the transformation of a sinful wretch into the daughter, wife and mother of Christ. Though Christ decrees that she should wear white clothes, Margery herself negotiates and renegotiates with Church officials for permission to effect God's will, and also obtains money to purchase the required garments.<sup>4</sup> Despite formal gestures toward divine intervention, Margery also puts together all the practical elements of her spiritual marriage to the Godhead, the (over literalized) symbol of her attainment of unio mystica (86-87). She purchases the ring, and while in Rome (where the ceremony takes place) secures white clothes and ensures, through a mediative vision of "Seynt Iohn þe Evangelyst," that she is confessed (81.3-10). As the relationship between Kempe and Christ in the text is generally depicted

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<sup>4</sup> See 84.37-38; 91.33-36, 92.1-4; and 103.28-35, 104.1-13 for details of Margery's efforts to obtain and wear white clothes.

in horizontal rather than hierarchical terms, Christ may be "misrecognized" as an extension of Margery Kempe. Divine authority thereby begins to reflect some of the gaps, partiality, and intermittent impotence that affect Kempe's spiritual identity.

There is, then, a very perceivable gap between the theoretically instrumental and unlimited power of God and the text's representation of the practical difficulty of effecting anything in a concrete world of entangled social relations. Christ's directives to Margery are hard to carry out, and often she limits her response to what is practically possible at the time, with the remainder of "God's will" deferred, delayed or denied. For years, Margery's white clothes appear only intermittently, and although the text's confused and non-linear chronology somewhat obscures the fact, Margery and Christ's desire that she live chaste also takes many years, some cash and John Kempe's co-operation to bring into effect. Christ's intermittent offers to wreck vengeance on Margery's various enemies are virtuously turned aside by Kempe before their effectiveness can be tested. Neither Margery Kempe nor her humanly depicted Christ possesses or exercises unlimited agency for authorizing Kempe as a believable and authoritative mystic.

The foregrounding of identity as a process of construction in The Book of Margery Kempe underscores the

technical difficulties of presenting or representing Margery Kempe as a mystic, and therefore as a religious sign or symbol. These difficulties exist despite the fact of Kempe's seemingly "natural" and effortless access to one very potent, if problematic, symbol of spirituality in late medieval religion, the body. The associations made by critics between Kempe's mode of mysticism and the tradition of affective piety are founded in the facts of Kempe's gender and that gender's deemed alignment with the "bodily" mystical and ascetic practices of affective religious tradition. The presence of the body in affective piety, once a trigger for the disapproval of scholarly advocates of the negative mystical way, has attained a positive value in recent reassessments of late medieval religiosity. But despite recent critical expectations about the way in which the body, and especially the female body, should figure in writings of medieval women mystics, in The Book of Margery Kempe the "natural sign" of the body is more often rendered absent than present.

### Chapter V: Body and Gender

"befor I bydde þe & comawnd þe, boldly clepe me Ihesus, þi loue, for I am þi loue & schal be þi loue wyth-owtyn ende . . . my derworthy dowtyr, þu must forsake þat þow louyst best in þis world, & þat is etyng of flesch. And in-stede of þat flesch þow schalt etyn my flesch & my blod, þat is þe very body of Crist in þe Sacrament of þe Awter." (The Book of Margery Kempe 17.3-13)

The body was offered a central position in the institutionalized symbolic system of late medieval religion as, increasingly, Church and priestly mediated sacraments became a central focus of late medieval worship, particularly the Eucharistic transubstantiation of bread and wine into the humanly realized body and blood of Christ.<sup>1</sup> Through the Eucharist, Christ's body was incorporated by the faithful on a regular (and for priests a daily) basis, forging a strong connective link between human and divine. The powerful symbolism of the Eucharist and its increasingly popular ritual served as a means of unifying the "disparate, separate, only loosely connected economic and political entities" (Rubin 12) that constituted the late medieval Church. Through the exclusive role of the priestly office

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<sup>1</sup> See Miri Rubin who discusses how the evolution of an "unambiguous definition of Christ's real bodily presence in the eucharist" transformed communion into "an enormous event" (65). Rubin describes ecclesiastical efforts to make uniform the Eucharist ritual, and notes the elevation of the office of the priesthood when theories developed that the benefits of the Eucharist could be received through veneration alone (at the moment of the priest's elevation of the host) as the actual communication of elements by the laity decreased (63-73).

of consecration, the eucharistic celebration also underwrote the "church's claim to exclusive and universal mediation of grace, of supernatural power" (Rubin 49). Like mysticism, communion in the body of Christ was an important "channel of grace" (Rubin 70), firmly anchored (both theoretically and practically) within male-dominated Church institutions.

Miri Rubin has pointed out, however, that a religious symbol, such as the body in the Eucharist, "can be used, read, understood very differently by different types of users" (8). Caroline Bynum has identified "women" as a specific category of those who employ eucharistic, and more particularly, body symbolism in late medieval religion. Bynum argues that the religious activities and understanding of medieval women focus on the body, and that for women especially "bodiliness provides access to the sacred" (Fragmentation and Redemption 186). She further suggests that women's relation to the female body serves as a locus of an extra-institutional female authority and agency within medieval religion.<sup>2</sup> The authority that Bynum proposes for the female body in late medieval religion originates in Christ's being perceived and received as body in medieval piety (Fragmentation and Redemption 192), and in women's particular association with body in medieval intellectual traditions (Fragmentation and Redemption 200). That

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<sup>2</sup> Thus Bynum's focus has been "the importance of charismatic authorization for women at a time when clerical control increased in the Church . . ." (195).

Christ's body is sometimes treated as female, "at least in certain of its salvific functions, especially its bleeding and nurturing" (Fragmentation and Redemption 204), suggests to Bynum that "Increasingly in the fourteenth century, lay piety became female piety . . . " (77). The more "extravagant" forms of bodily religious practices such as the ascetic disciplining of the flesh (through fasting and the self-infliction of pain, injury or mortification) are for Bynum characteristically female. Women, she says, "give positive significance to bodily occurrences" (Fragmentation and Redemption 190) and one inference to be drawn from this is that "the spiritualities of male and female mystics were different, and this difference has something to do with body" (Fragmentation and Redemption 194), or perhaps even biology (Fragmentation and Redemption 200). Male and female spiritual behaviors which look similar are in fact, Bynum argues, different. Men whose religiosity appears body-centred or "experiential and visionary" are said to have "often understood themselves in feminine images and learned their pious practices from women" (Fragmentation and Redemption 191). Male writers who "use extremely physical and physiological language" <sup>3</sup> produce writing that "often lacks the immediacy of women's; the male voice is impersonal" (Fragmentation and Redemption 190).

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<sup>3</sup> Bynum gives as examples Bernard of Clairvaux and John Tauler.

Bynum's representation of affective piety as the gendered category of "female" piety allows her to view certain religious behaviors, for example, the extremes of physical austerity and asceticism, as constituting a specifically female rebellion against the institutionalized Church and its increasing tendency to compromise with the world (62).<sup>4</sup> Through such rebellion, pious women come to be seen by men as comprising "a criticism of male power and an alternative to it" (Fragmentation and Redemption 37), and this status confers on such women a degree of moral or religious authority. Bynum's thesis about women's access to authority through the female body -- clearly to some extent founded on a theory of female physical nature and consequent psychological and social behavior<sup>5</sup> -- gestures toward a "natural" model of female religiosity and religious practice. However, though Bynum expects that the life practices and spiritual writing of medieval women will "reveal" evidence of a uniform (and monolithic) female

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<sup>4</sup> Bynum notes that male spiritual advisers and theologians frequently advised women to moderate their extreme ascetic behaviors (62).

<sup>5</sup>

Though at certain points in her text Bynum is at pains to acknowledge "the cultural construction of categories such as "female" . . ." (17), she nevertheless proposes biology as to some degree the basis of female identity. She states, for example, that "the body . . . is taken not merely [emphasis mine] as a biological given" (19) and argues that "it is possible that there is a biological element in women's pre-disposition to certain kinds of bodily experiences" (200). In effect, her discussions of female piety produce a biological model for women's religiosity.

piety, her model does not successfully account for The Book of Margery Kempe, which stands as a critique of or challenge to the proposed natural authority of the gendered female body.

Miri Rubin says of the deployment in late medieval ritual of "so seemingly natural a sign as the body" that its "rhetorical use . . . always attempts to draw from its very naturalness an imputed and undisputed acceptance of that which is signified by it" (269). Any such rhetorical use of the female body in The Book of Margery Kempe, however, is compromised by the text's frequent acknowledgement of the thoroughly constructed nature of this sign. Bynum's proposal of an authoritative female body in late medieval religion downplays or neglects the fact that the sanction and authority offered the female body is not uniform. It is not the female body, but a specifically selected form of female body, the intact virgin body, which is granted elevated and authoritative status in a medieval hierarchy of female bodies. And in The Book of Margery Kempe, this virgin body need not be found, but can be constructed.

The obstacle to spiritual authority presented by Margery Kempe's form of female body, a body "saturated" in sexual relations and the biological function of childbirth, is acknowledged early in the text when a pregnant Kempe informs Christ "Lord, I am not worthy to heryn þe spekyn . . ." (48.29-30). After Christ's initial assurance "trow

þow rygth wel þat I lofe wyfes also . . ." (49.1-2), Kempe still laments "lak of maydenhed is to me now gret sorwe" (50.21-22), at which point Christ obliging acknowledges "þu art a mayden in þi sowle" (52.27), verbally reconstituting Kempe's virginity. This linguistically restored virgin body does not, however, become Kempe's permanent or continuing possession and is never more than intermittently present in the text. It disappears entirely during some of Kempe's encounters with secular and Church officials, when she reconstitutes the female body of wife or mother as a defense against implications of sexual transgressions, declaring "I neuyr had part of mannys body in þis worlde . . . but of myn husbondys body, whom I am bowndyn to be þe lawe of matrimony, & be whom I haue born xiiij childeryn" (115.28-32).

Not only is the female body multiple and mutable in The Book of Margery Kempe, it is also at times surprisingly absent. With the exception of Kempe's bodily spiritual gifts, virtually the only direct details provided about Kempe's body are references to her quaking and trembling with fear during hostile encounters with crowds or officials, the text noting in one case that "hir flesch tremelyd & whakyd wondirly þat sche was fayn to puttyn hir handys vndyr hir cloþis þat it schulde not ben aspyed" (124.24-26), and references to bodily illness which are primarily collected and confined within one chapter. There

is also a reference to her hurt foot and the way it impedes her pilgrimage travels in part two of the work. None of the physical details supplied, with the exception of the childbirth which opens the text (and which stands as a metaphor for spiritual rebirth), seem specifically gendered as "female."

As for particular forms of bodily spiritual practice, those that some call "female" also appear, disappear and change throughout the text. The text acknowledges and shows Margery participating in a number of ascetic disciplinary practices, including fasting and the wearing of a hair shirt. But these behaviors are not continuous. Margery's initial fasting regimen is set aside, with divine approval, in a negotiated exchange for her husband's agreement to live chaste (24.12-16). Fasting later reappears, only to disappear when "Owr Lady" advises Kempe to seek to be discharged from her vow to fast one day a week "pat sche xulde ben mythy to beryn hir ghostly labowrys" (162.15-16). The form of fasting behavior is also mutable; Christ orders Kempe to "ete flesch" again after many years of abstinence (161.24) and against her protests that this inconsistency will make her despised and scorned in the community. Kempe's divine advisors do not hesitate to disrupt or reconfigure the "natural" expression of her piety.

The manipulation of Margery Kempe's body through the spiritual gifts of tears, cries and writhings is read by

some critics as a somatic "female" language, deployed by Kempe in direct competition to the institutional language of priests. Such a language could, it is argued, provide a vehicle for the authority of female experience. But if Kempe's body language is "female" language, it is not represented as a permanent, guaranteed natural source of authorization or self-authorization for Kempe's "female" spiritual identity. These spiritual gifts are not simply revealed, but are constructed and deconstructed during the course of the text. Margery's tears appear first, with cries and writhings not added until her major pilgrimage to Jerusalem.<sup>6</sup> The level and extent of the physical manifestations varies over the years, until Christ finally withdraws the more socially disruptive of the gifts (155.28-31). It is difficult to view these changes as natural developments in Margery's increasingly perfected piety, as the text records ongoing hostile campaigns, including one by an influential cleric, against Kempe's physical demonstrations during worship. The community reception or rejection of Kempe's bodily gifts as a "sign" of spirituality would seem to provide some purely social motivation for Margery's modified physical "expressions" of piety. The potential of her body language as an alternate, extra-institutional "female" vehicle of authority is

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<sup>6</sup> See 68.23-25 for the initial occurrence of Margery's cries and writhings.

therefore not consistently maintained or sustained in the text. While Margery's cries and writhings initially draw public attention to her proposed status as spiritual symbol and authoritative mystic, they cease when hostility to those cries and writhings increases to a point which threatens to permanently bar Kempe from church services. What replaces them, as one critic notes, are words, specifically "the long volume she persuaded her scribes to write" (Fienberg 141). The physical "female body" is willingly exchanged for the "body" of the text. The identity of Margery Kempe and the identity of her mode of mysticism or piety therefore cannot be "fixed" by the sign of the authority of the female body. In this text, the body is simply one of many elements that, coming together at a time, in a place, in some configuration may for an instant produce the effects of "authority."

### Chapter VI: Conclusion

"'I am þe most vnworþi creatur þat euыр þow schewedyst grace vn-to in erth' 'A, dowtyr,' seyð owыр Lord, 'fere þe nowt, I take non hede what a man hath ben, but I take hede what he wyl ben'" (The Book of Margery Kempe 49.18-21)

In the words quoted above, Margery Kempe's Christ acknowledges the radical incompleteness of human identity. Kempe's identity, Christ says, is not to be 'fixed' in the past, but is contingent upon an as yet unrealized future. Christ's words may appear to disconnect the past from the future, disrupting an otherwise continuous and consecutive flow of identity through discrete localities of time. But the text's representation of the relation between identity and time is more complex than this arbitrary overthrow of a fixed temporal system would suggest. For despite Christ's dismissive words, Margery Kempe's past is not discarded from her book. Every time Kempe tells "hir lyfe fro þe begynnyng vn-to þat owыр" (63.4-5) in confessions to various church officials or to the scribes who write her book, the past configures, and in turn is re-configured, by the present moment of her text. That the text includes repeated tellings and retellings of Margery's life underscores the point that the past cannot occupy a single inviolate position in the non-linear chronology of her book. As the proem acknowledges:

Thys boke is not wretyn in ordyr, euery thyng  
aftyр оper as it wer don, but lych as þe mater  
cam to þe creatur in mend whan it schuld be  
wretyn, for it was so long er it was wretyn þat

sche had for-getyn þe tyme & þe ordyr whan  
thyngys befellyn. (5.12-16)

Here Margery's past is not a recovered artifact, easily fixed in its proper chronological place. Rather, the past is what "happens" continuously, but incompletely, in the process of constructing the text. In addition to fissures introduced into identity with "þe mater" of the past, Christ's anticipation of Margery Kempe's future identity pinpoints another source of insufficiency, another "gap," in the present moment of her identity. There can be no conscious "end" to identity, no sufficiency of the present "self" with a future in anticipation.

The acknowledged radical incompleteness of identity I have located within The Book of Margery Kempe might be characterized by Robert Sturges as one of the "facts of medieval literary life" (115). Sturges' critique of the application of modern editing practices to medieval literary works is founded on his analysis of the conditions of literary production and dissemination during the Middle Ages, an analysis which identifies the medieval text as "simply not complete - not fully what it could be."<sup>1</sup> According to Sturges, the "origins" of a late medieval text are unrecoverable as "late medieval works are always written in the margins . . . of an earlier work or works" (128). As

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<sup>1</sup> Sturges is quoting from Gerald L. Burns "The Originality of Texts in a Manuscript Culture." Inventions: Writing, Textuality, and Understanding in Literary History. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982).

well, there is no fixed or final end-point to a medieval work, as medieval literary practice constantly alters or reworks material, either purposefully, as in Chaucer's reworking of material from Boccaccio and others and Chaucer's production of multiple versions of some of his own works, or through the exigencies of manuscript transmission.

The "commentary" of past and future production written into and both supplementing and fragmenting the medieval work contributes to a "textual instability" (118) that is a feature of the "participatory experience" of the medieval literary community (116). Sturges believes that communal, socialized and anarchic aspects of the conditions of medieval literary production, call for a "new understanding of the literary functions of author, work, and reader" (115). The modern editorial concern to identify an authoritative "copy-text" for a work and the practice of privileging authorial intentions ignore the alterity of a medieval literary practice which features multiple versions and communal creation of works, along with "the dissolution of the author" amidst evidence of collaboration, translation, adaptation and borrowing (127). Sturges suggests that "authors have many different, and often, conflicting intentions; and, unlike a print culture, a manuscript culture encourages all these different intentions to find expression" (119). Modern editing procedures can then be seen as misguided, in part because they are

unacknowledged, interventions to complete, finish or fix the indeterminate identity of medieval works.

Early critics of Margery's book often intervene to try to fix or complete what seems unstable or unfinished in the work. Louise Collis' The Apprentice Saint, for example, is a lengthy retelling of Margery's life that "completes" it by adding historical or social detail that Kempe either was not conscious of or "failed" to include, and by adding Collis' sometimes snide suppositions about the "true" motives for Margery's actions and the "true" reception of her mystical practices in the community. Critics like David Knowles and Drew Hinderer, concerned with whether the work properly represents mysticism, resent the many non-devotional details supplied in the text. Yet they find Margery's book incomplete because it lacks an "appropriate" model of mystical consciousness. This they obligingly supply by referring readers to the better example of great English mystics such as Walter Hilton and Julian of Norwich.

The effort to complete The Book of Margery Kempe with critical commentary allows critics to at least produce an authoritative reading of a text that itself is usually denied authoritative status. However, as my examination of the operation of identity, authority and gender in The Book of Margery Kempe has indicated, the "fixed" authority or authoritative status that early critics believed they could deny to the work had already been effectively refused by the

practice of the text. This refusal of authority may be, as Robert Sturges suggests, a particular consequence of a medieval manuscript culture which necessarily produces multiple "versions" of a work rather than a single, inviolate, authoritative text. In any case, identity, authority and gender in The Book of Margery Kempe are evidently multiple and/or mutable, shown to be the created and recreated effects of the moment of social interaction. Margery's book self-consciously displays its understanding of the provisional status of endings and the necessary incompleteness of texts and identities which at any present moment, including the moment a text is received by the reader (or critic), can be revised, appended or extended in a continuing and continuous free play of writing. Recent critical theory can offer an alternative to critical interventions that would "finish" The Book of Margery Kempe. The insights of psychoanalytic, socially based or deconstructive literary criticism not only provide the means to understand the multiplicity of the subject of the text (Margery Kempe, mysticism, et al) but, at its best, this community of diverse and differently situated critical voices offers many (perhaps even enough) positions for speaking the divided subjectivity and the divided intentions of this medieval literary work. From the modern critical perspective, critics like Delany, Partner, Lochrie and Beckwith need not work to recover from The Book of Margery

Kempe the "authentic" (female) voice of a medieval woman mystic and mystical writer, or to finally, and prescriptively, "decide" the identity and authority of The Book of Margery Kempe. They can instead participate in negotiations with and over the text that will extend and not end the free play of writing.

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